

Why being yelled at by your boss could reap payback

Sam Yam Kai Chi

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Many of us have experienced the ire of an angry boss. Getting shouted at or sworn at in front of colleagues, or being humiliated for making a mistake – these are often seen as unfortunate but inevitable side effects of today's high-pressure workplace.

For individuals on the receiving end, such experiences can be frustrating and demotivating at the least, or at worst even lead to the employee deciding to quit his job.

After confrontational situations like this, it is common to assume that the boss in question goes on to simply pretend nothing has happened or even quietly blame the employee for the outburst.

Yet there is also often another side to the story, one that might even prove beneficial to those who, on the face of it, can seem to be the victims of the outburst. In a study with colleagues at the National

University of Singapore Business School, and at universities in the United States, we found that in many cases, bosses in these situations feel guilt over their actions and try to make amends.

Published in March last year, our study centres on a psychological concept known as "moral cleansing theory", which takes the view that people seek to balance their moral and immoral actions and thus maintain what they see as their moral self-image. Engaging in confrontational, immoral or norm-violating ways dampens this self-image, prompting individuals to seek compensatory behaviours that subsequently "cleanse" their feelings of immorality and restore their moral image.

Placing this theory in a workplace context, we suggest that a boss' confrontation with a member of staff can trigger two key components of moral concern – care and justice. This weakens the boss' moral self-image, leading him to try to compensate for the confrontation by seeking to make it up to the abused staff member.

To test this out, we conducted a pair of studies involving bosses and their immediate followers in China over a period of two weeks. In the first study, both parties were surveyed at the end of each workday – bosses were asked to assess their abusive behaviour towards their staff, while followers were asked to report on their boss' constructive behaviours. We surveyed 34 managers and 85 subordinates, all from a real estate firm based in south-west China.

Our results showed that bosses who engaged in abusive behaviour evoked a momentary experience of guilt towards the follower, in turn prompting the boss to engage in two specific types of behaviour. One is supportive, such as showing concern for followers and looking out for their welfare. The other is directive, which can mean clarifying work goals and job expectations, maintaining open channels of communication or other steps aimed at helping the follower in question to excel.

In a second study, we then asked a group of bosses to complete a survey

at midday of each workday to assess their abusive behaviour and psychological experiences during the preceding morning. Then, at the end of the workday, their direct followers were surveyed to rate their boss' reparative actions that had occurred in the afternoon. For this study, we surveyed 72 bosses and 72 immediate subordinates from a manufacturing firm based in south-east China.

Our analysis showed that in addition to feeling guilty after behaving abusively, leaders also perceive a loss of moral credits and therefore actively engage in more supportive and directive reparative behaviours afterwards.

We found that these results depend on two critical factors. First, abusive bosses compensate for their wrongdoing only when they have a high sensitivity for moral issues at work or when they frequently engage in moral reflection. And second, abusive bosses must also possess moral courage to face their past wrongdoing and a strong willpower to uphold moral principles. In other words, only

morally attentive and courageous bosses will engage in reparative actions after mistreating followers.

So what does this mean for followers, bosses and companies in handling abusive situations?

For followers, our study reinforces something they likely have already sensed – that bosses who are abusive at one moment may be supportive and helpful later. With that in mind, followers should be encouraged to learn to cope with occasional instances of abusive leader behaviour. For example, rather than withdrawing from work or retaliating, followers could seize the opportunity to have more constructive conversations with their bosses and encourage them to engage in more supportive and directive behaviours in the future. Our research suggests that most bosses will respond constructively to these requests to compensate for their prior wrongdoing.

For bosses who might perpetrate abusive supervisor behaviour and feel immoral as a result, it is important to go the extra mile and perform more constructive

leadership behaviours than normal. Being a leader doesn't mean that you will always behave appropriately. But once outbursts do occur, it is important to find ways to apologise to your followers and do something to make up for it. Doing so helps create a healthier work environment for your employees.

Our research should also encourage companies to implement training programmes to help managers improve their leadership and interpersonal skills and curb abusive behaviour in the first place. To bolster moral attentiveness, they might consider ethics training programmes to encourage employees to regularly reflect on their misbehaviour at work.

At the firm level, managers or human resources departments may also consider setting standards for apologies and forgiveness. This could be done by instituting policies that encourage employees to be morally courageous and to proactively make amends for any misbehaviour.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Sam Yam Kai Chi is an assistant professor in the Department of Management and Organisation at the National University of Singapore Business School.